

**History and Archaeology of the New
Alamo Community College District Headquarters Tract,
San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas**



by
Barbara A. Meissner

Prepared for:
Facility Programming and Consulting
Alamo Community College District



Prepared by:
Center for Archaeological Research
The University of Texas at San Antonio
Special Report, No. 34

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The text of this report was written by Barbara A. Meissner. This report was edited by Bruce Moses. Bruce Moses was the illustrator responsible for the graphics in this report. The photographs of the remains of Playland Park were taken by Cynthia M. Muñoz, who also served as the Principal Investigator for the project.

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2008, the Facility Programming and Consulting in San Antonio, Texas contracted with the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR), of the University of Texas at San Antonio to conduct an archaeological survey of the 12.5-acre property where the new headquarters building for the Alamo Community College District was to be built (Figure 1). Such surveys, intended to find and assess the significance of historic properties that may be impacted by development, are required by the Antiquities Code of Texas which is administered by the Texas Historical Commission. The first step preceding such surveys is the review of archival records to reconstruct a history of ownership and use of the subject tract. This archival and deed research helps document who owned portions of the area, what buildings and/or businesses stood on it, and what activities may have impacted or disturbed any buried archaeological deposits that may be found.

The archival and deed research carried out by the staff of the Center identified two exciting elements of the history of the parcel of land and the subsequent survey showed that tangible remains of these aspects still remained on the site. The oldest historic remains on the tract consisted of the remains of the Acequia Madre de Valero (also called the Alamo Acequia or the Alamo Ditch) that forms part of the eastern boundary of the project area. The more recent but significant aspect of San Antonio's history is embodied in the remains of Playland Park, an amusement park formerly located within the project area. This popular report is extracted from the technical report that discussed the results of the archaeological survey in some detail (Meissner 2009).

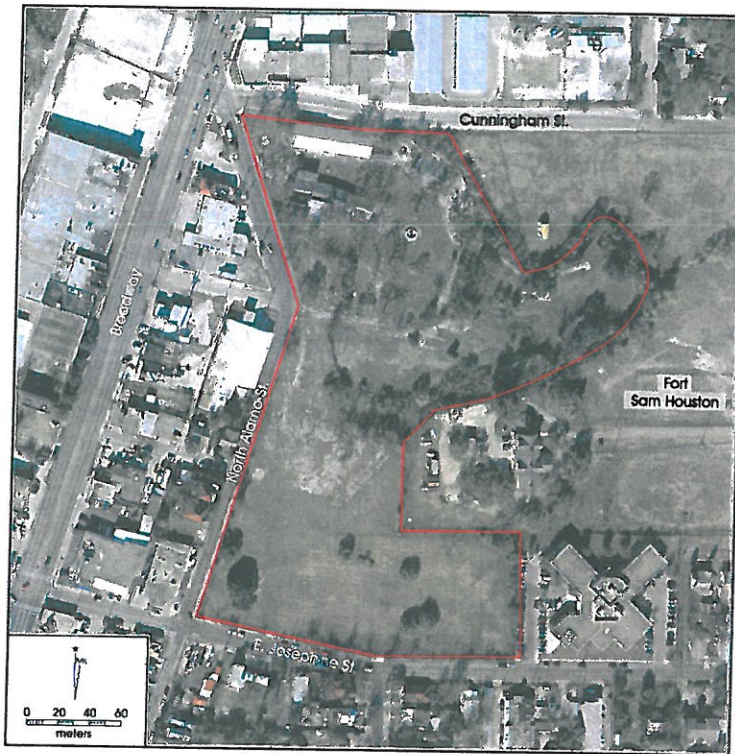


Figure 1. An aerial view of the location of the new ACCD headquarters, before construction. The remains of Playland Park are visible in the northern part of the property. A remnant of the Acequia Madre de Valero forms the eastern border of most of the property.

THE HISTORY OF PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

One of the first steps preceding the actual fieldwork of any archaeological project is the review of the historic background for the project area. The background review typically looks at the history of ownership of the land and attempts to document what improvements may have been made to it over the years. Our review of the historic background was made much easier by the recent publication of two works of historic research: *The Spanish Acequias of San Antonio* (2004) by I. Wayne Cox, and *Just for Fun: Jimmy Johnson's Playland Park* (2007), by Ed Gaida. Most of the information about Playland Park in this report came from Gaida's excellent book.

More historic information was available at the web site of the Bexar County Clerk's Office, where scanned images of many historic deed records are available. Previous

In the past, a search of the deed records for a property required a trip to City Hall and long hours of going by hand through the large books containing the deed records. Today these records can be viewed from any computer with internet access.

archaeological excavations of the Acequia Madre de Valero also provided excellent information.

The property that today includes the project area was originally granted to José Antonio de la Garza (1776-1851) by the Mexican government in 1824, and is part of the two leagues of land awarded to him at that time. De la Garza, an important man in early San Antonio, owned large tracts of land along the Medina River. In 1818, de la Garza was given the unique privilege of minting a copper coin, known as a “*jola*”, with a face value of $\frac{1}{2}$ *real*. This coin had the initials JAG and the date 1818 on the obverse and a single stamped star on the reverse (Figure 2). Some historians have wondered if this is the origin of the Lone Star of Texas.



Figure 2. *The Garza coin: a) Obverse, showing the initials JAG and the date 1818; b) Reverse, showing the single stamped star. Shown at 200% scale.*

The project area was part of the property that de la Garza's wife, Josefa, conveyed to their son Leonardo in 1866, after the death of their oldest son, José. At some point before 1898, the southern portion of the property, the portion that lies south of Appler Street, was separated from the northern part, probably in order to mortgage the property. Search of deed records has not located details of this transaction.

In 1877, Leonardo Garza deeded an easement to the United States of America, giving the federal government the right to lay pipes from the San Antonio River across his property the newly created Fort Sam Houston, which was being built on the other side of the acequia. This land had been donated by the City of San Antonio the year before. By taking water from the river, the new fort did interfere with the water rights of landowners along the acequia.

The northern part of the property, north of Appler Street, was sold by Leonardo Garza and his wife Carolina to Friedrich Groos and Hulda Groos in 1903, who in turn sold the property to Paul Poppe in 1905. He built greenhouses and several other buildings to support his garden and landscape business (Figure 3). Mr. Poppe's greenhouses and numerous other buildings are shown, on the 1912 Sanborn Insurance map. Mr. Poppe's business was apparently successful because he was able to pay off several liens on

the property by 1930, when he received clear title. Twelve years later, Poppe and his wife Martha sold the property to S. L. Carrico. Carrico, in turn, sold the property to James E. Johnson. It was on this

northern portion of the project area,

that the majority of the Playland Park rides and other entertainments were located during the early years. At least the foundation of one of Mr. Poppe's greenhouses was still standing when Johnson leased the property and was converted into the "Midway" building of Playland Park.

The Groos family was part of the massive migration of Germans into Texas that began in 1848. The family included Carl (Karl), his wife Hulda, and his brothers Friedrich and Gustave. Together, the brothers created a freight company, which took Confederate cotton to Mexico to avoid the U.S. Navy blockade of Southern ports. The business was successful and after the war the family moved to San Antonio, began buying land, and started a private bank, which, in 1912, became the Groos National Bank.

The ownership history of the southern part of the project area is not so clear. It was sold by the Bexar County Sheriff under a court order from the 45th District Court of Bexar County, in January 1899. The list of owners of the property at the time of the court ruling, on October 5, 1898, included Leonardo Garza, and the San Antonio National Bank, as well as ten other names. The property was sold by Sheriff's Deed to Friedrich Groos and his sister-in-law, Hulda Groos. Transfer of this property by the Grooses to anyone else has not been found in the available records. However, a warranty deed, dated March 17, 1945, exists, in which six heirs of Leonardo Garza sold the property to M. Riley Wyatt, who in turn sold the property to James E. Johnson on September 25, 1946. No records explaining how the property was returned to the Garza family have been found at this time. The western part of this section of the property was used primarily as a parking lot for Playland Park, while the eastern part contained several rides and the shooting gallery. Thus, the two parts of the property were joined again under the ownership of James E. Johnson, the builder of Playland Park.

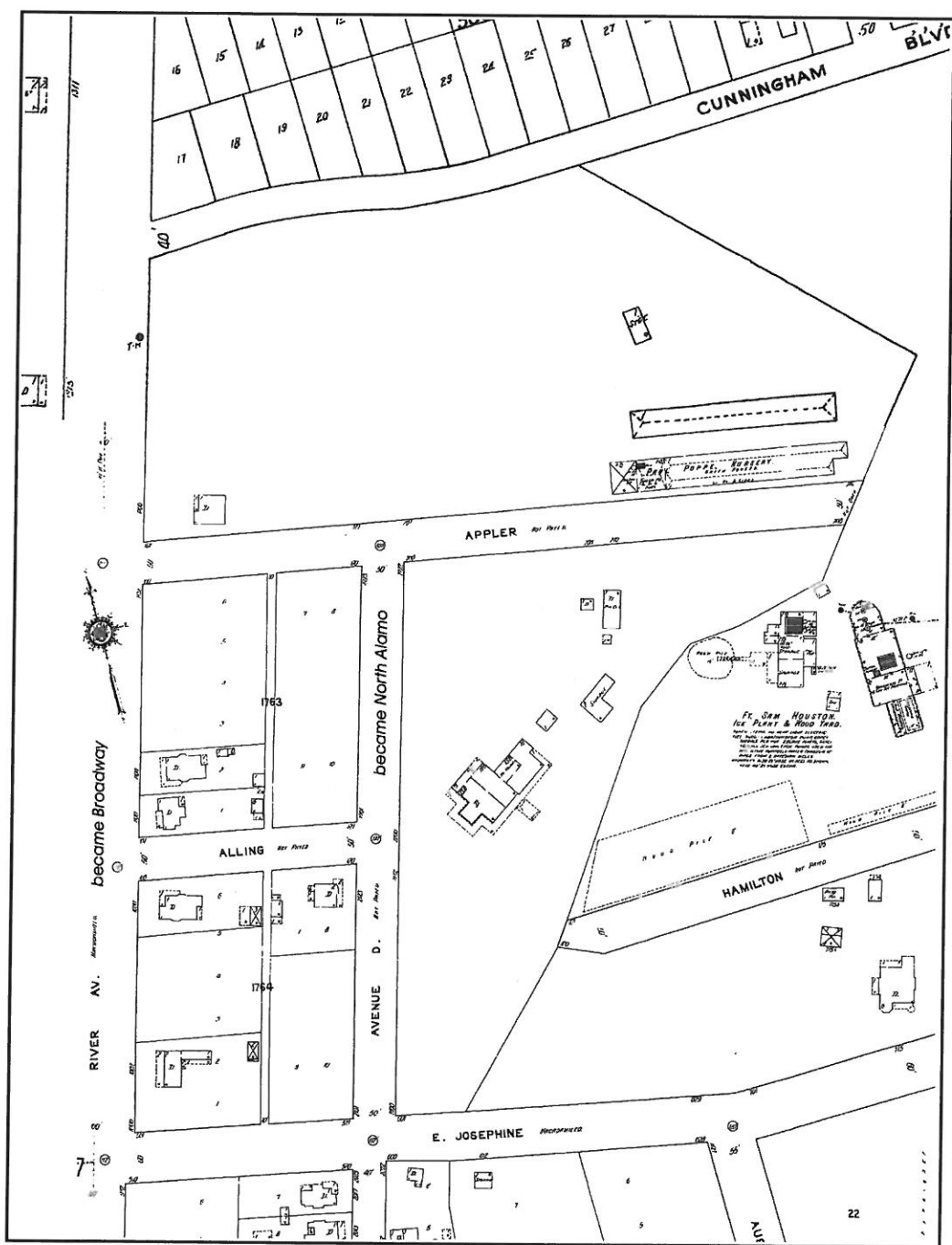


Figure 3. The project area shown on the 1912 Sanborn insurance map. Note the greenhouses and other structures built by Paul Poppe between 1903 and 1912.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY RESULTS

On November 11, 2008 a field crew from CAR surveyed the entire property, looking for evidence of any previously unknown historic or prehistoric sites. The crew found that the entire area appeared to have been either disturbed or covered with fill making it very unlikely that any prehistoric sites would be found. The only historic structures found were those associated with Playland Park. In addition, a short segment of the historic Acequia Madre de Valero also was identified and documented through drawings and photographs. The next two sections, discuss in more detail the two historic features found during the survey.

The Remnants of the Acequia Madre de Valero

Although there is still a ditch in the same location as the historic Acequia Madre de Valero, erosion, which is active and ongoing, has destroyed the original acequia itself, and had probably done so before Jimmy Johnson bought the property. The existing parts of the ditch are as much as 4.9 m (16 ft) deep on the northern end of the property, near Cunningham Street, and as much as 10 m (32.8 ft.) wide. While the original dimensions of the acequia at this location are unknown, other sections of the Acequia Madre de Valero have been excavated, and all are roughly 5 feet deep and 6 feet wide.

A roughly 95 foot (29 m) section of the Acequia Madre de Valero, excavated by Mardith Schuetz in 1966 at Hemisfair Plaza, was found to be in remarkably good condition. It has been restored and can be seen in Hemisfair Park today.

The Remnants of Playland Park

Photo documentation of the remaining structures of Playland Park consisted of all existing structures, including buildings, concrete slabs, footers, etc. The following is a brief description of selected structures. A complete list of the remaining structures can be found in CAR's technical report on this project (Meissner 2009).

Structure 1

Structure 1 is a building, open on one side, constructed of cement blocks with a wooden superstructure and asphalt shingled roof (Figure 4). It was used as accommodation for a fortune teller on one side and a photographer on the other.

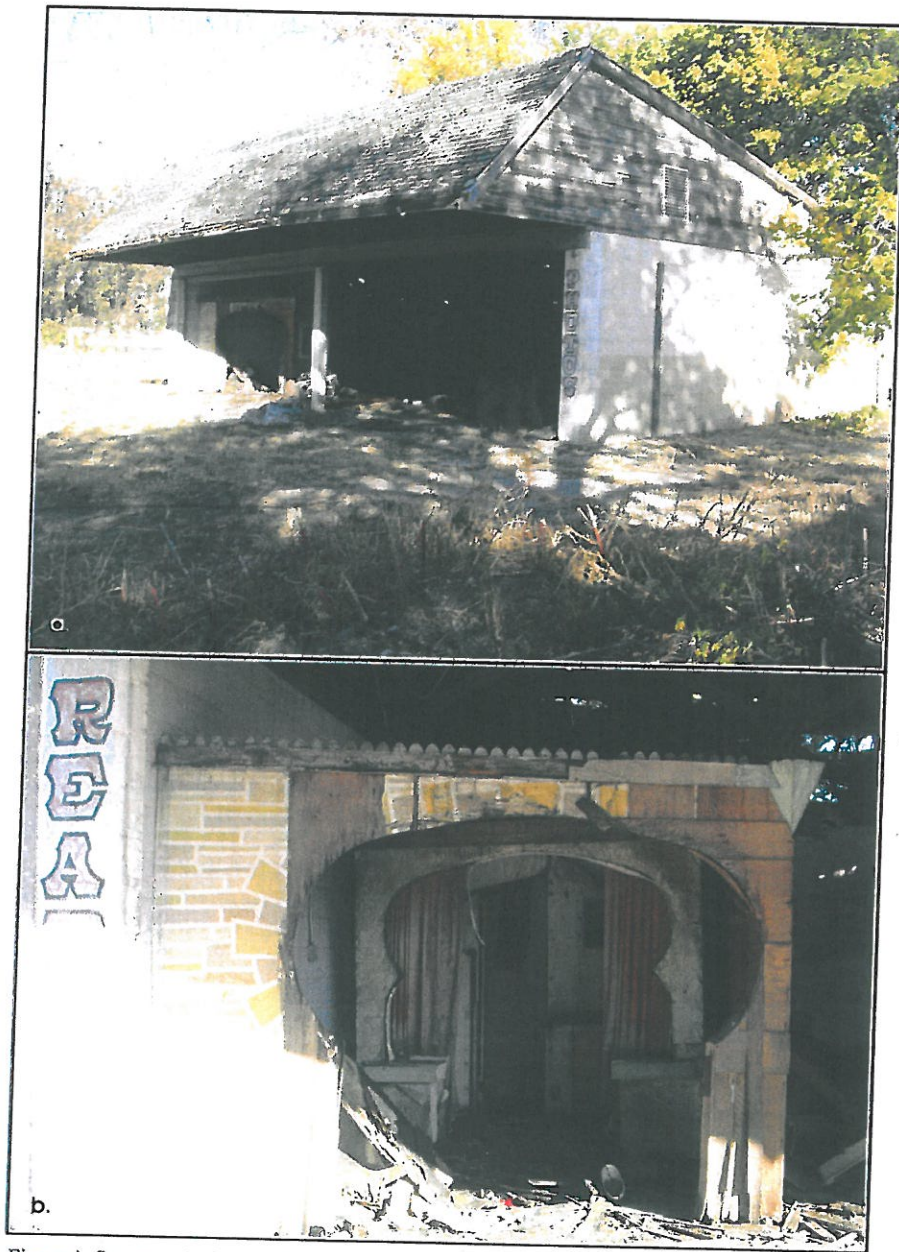


Figure 4. Structure 1, showing degree of deterioration: a) view from east b) closer view of the remains of the fortune-teller's section.

Structure 3

Structure 3 is the remains of the building known as “The Midway”, originally constructed on the remains of one of Paul Poppe’s greenhouses. The building was open-sided on the north side, with this area subdivided into several spaces where various “games” were offered (Figure 5). The wooden roof of the structure extended beyond the building to provide cover on the north side.

Two large murals decorated each end of Structure 3 (Figure 6). The southern half of Structure 3 contained the administrative offices of the park and the entrance to the Putt-Putt gulf course.



Figure 5. Three views of the remains of several of the individual "games" areas in the Midway (Structure 3).



Figure 6. Murals on the Midway building: a) west side "Alien Landscape"; b) east side "Sesame Street".

Structure 4

Structure 4 is another open-sided building with a roofed overhang, similar to Structure 1. It is built of concrete blocks and has a wooden roof that has been extended to provide additional shade for park visitors. The roof is in poor condition.

Structure 6

Structure 6 consists of the remains of a large concrete fountain (Figure 7). This fountain was located just east of the most active area of Playland Park and would have provided some cooling for the crowds in the hot South Texas summers.

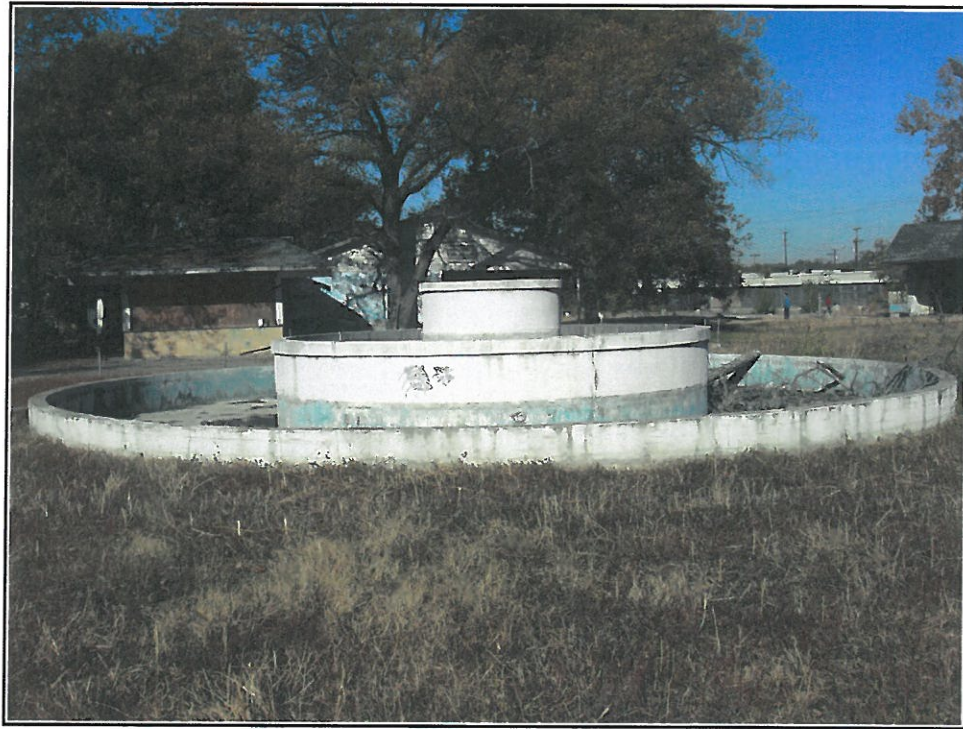


Figure 7. *Remains of a large circular concrete fountain.*

The Bottle Dump

The CAR field crew located a dump of soda bottles near the remnants of the Acequia Madre del Valero, on the east side of the property (Figure 8). In his book, Ed Gaida tells the story of these bottles, using it as an example of the way that Jimmy Johnson was always looking for a business advantage. Shortly after the end of World War II, the owner of the Mathews Bottling Company mentioned to Johnson that he had thousands of six ounce pop bottles that he no longer wanted because the end of government restrictions on the use of sugar was allowing him to bottle sodas in larger bottles. Johnson allowed him to dump the bottles behind the roller coaster. Later he made use of the bottles he had gotten for free:

Bottles were suspended from the ceiling with a string. Park visitors could purchase 5 marbles for a dime and using a sling shot attempt to break bottles to win a prize. The game lasted until 1974, when for reasons of safety it was replaced by a football toss.



Figure 8. *The bottle dump.*

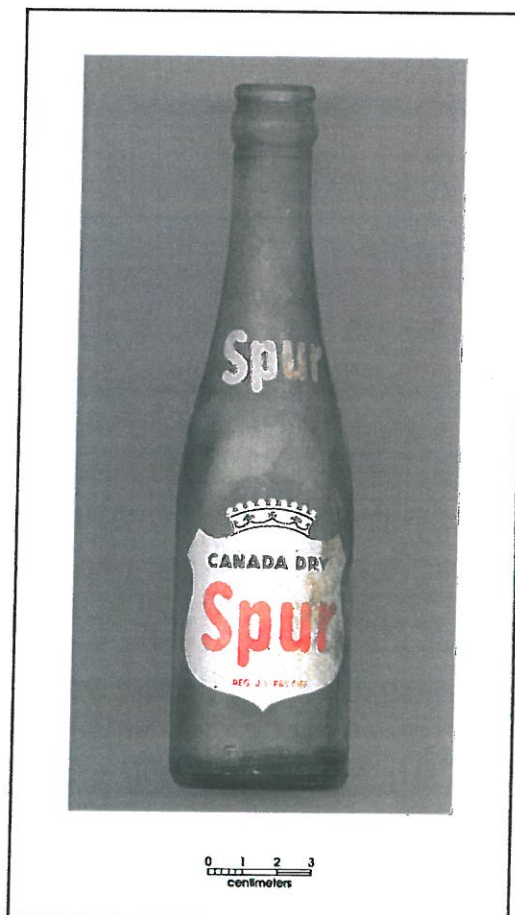


Figure 9. *Sample of the bottles found in the bottle dump.*

Though the slingshot game presumably used thousands of bottles in the decades it was in operation, at least several hundred are still in the original pile. Two bottles were collected as a sample from the bottle cache. They are made of natural (aqua-colored) glass and have applied color labels indicating that they were intended to contain Spur cola, made by Canada Dry (Figure 9). The back of the bottle reads:

SPUR
A Cola Beverage
Contents 6 fluid ozs.
Manufactured and Bottled by
Barq's Beverages, Inc.
Corpus Christi, Texas

Makers marks on the bottom of the sample bottles show that both were made at the Owens—Illinois bottle-making plant in Streator, Illinois in 1947.

OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORIC CONTEXT

The remains of the Acequia Madre de Valero and Playland Park provide an opportunity to reflect upon and review the broader historic context of these architectural features. Individually, they each remind us of specific times and places that resonate in the lives of many current inhabitants of our City. Taken together, they allow us to weave together key aspects of San Antonio's history from its Colonial roots in the early 18th century through the enterprising spirit of the mid-20th century that allowed it to flourish into the jewel of South Texas that it is today. The following two sections paint a broader picture of these times to allow the reader to better situate the two main historic resources found on the tract and more fully appreciate their roles within historic and modern San Antonio. We begin with the Acequia Madre de Valero (Figure 10).

The Acequia Madre de Valero (Alamo Acequia)

The original motives of the Spanish in establishing a settlement in the San Antonio River Valley were largely two-fold:

- 1) To establish a secure way station for expeditions to the beleaguered missions of East Texas. The missions in East Texas were intended to help build a firm border against the

encroachments of the French, who were pushing west from their base in New Orleans. The Franciscan missionaries in East Texas hoped to convert many Native Americans to Christianity. The Spanish politicians hoped that encouraging the local Native Americans to become Catholics and Spanish citizens would make them allies in the fight to protect Spanish claims in the area. A strong community at San Antonio, located about a third of the distance from the well-established settlements along the Rio Grande to the East Texas missions, would be an important part of this effort.

- 2) To move the rapidly failing Mission San Francisco de Solano from the Rio Grande to an area where the local Native Americans seemed friendly and the water was abundant. The Franciscan monks, in particular, were enticed to the location because of the water spilling from literally hundreds of springs along the edge of the Edwards Escarpment. These coalesced into two major water sources less than two miles apart, the San Antonio River and San Pedro Creek.

The Spanish obsession with water was founded in the need for irrigation for successful farming in the semi-arid lands of their home country. The men who established Mission San Antonio de Valero (later known as the Alamo) and Presidio San Antonio de Béjar in 1718, recognized the sporadic nature of rainfall in south Texas and knew that if these settlements were to thrive, they must have water for irrigation.

San Antonio, then as now, has one of the most variable annual rainfall amounts in the continental U.S., ranging from as much as 52.28" to as little as 10.11" between 1871 and 2008. Only by using irrigation could the Spanish insure that there would be enough produce to feed themselves and to entice local Native Americans to enter the missions.

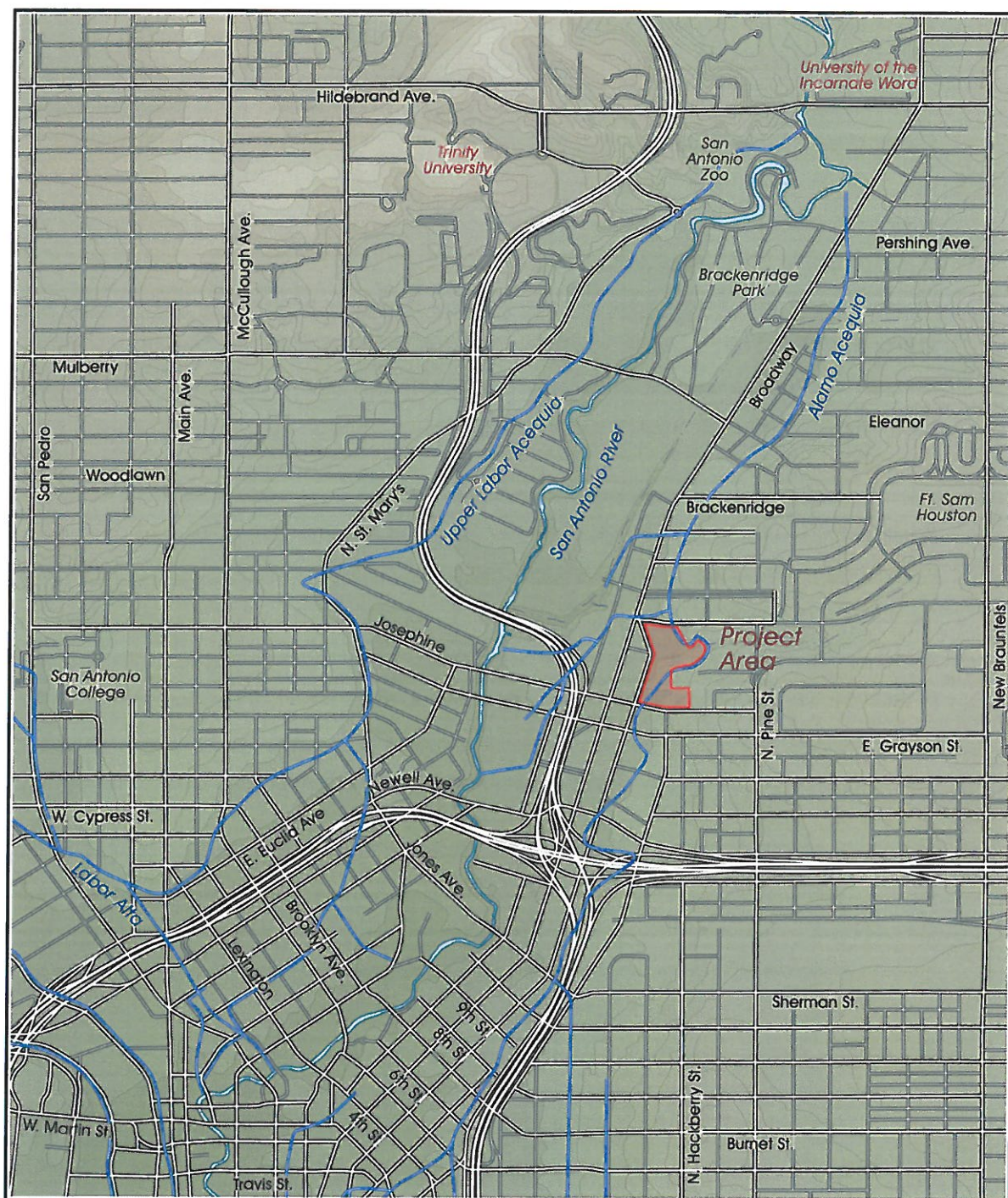


Figure 10. Map of the Acequia Madre de Valero, showing the project area, the San Antonio River, and other northern acequias.

The original mission and presidio were located near the San Pedro Springs, but this proved not to be the best location due to the flooding from Olmos Creek. The presidio was moved to the San Antonio River. The mission was later moved east of the San Antonio River, probably sometime late in 1719, and to its final location,

The Spanish word *acequia* was derived from the Arabic *al-saqiya* meaning irrigation ditch, and entered the Spanish language during the years (711–1492 C. E.) in which the Moors, Islamic Arabic-speaking peoples from North Africa, controlled most of Spain.

across the river from the presidio, in 1720. At some time early in 1719, the first acequia, later known as the San Pedro Acequia, was begun. This ran from just below San Pedro Springs to the San Antonio River. Another acequia, later called the Upper Labor Acequia, took water from the San Antonio River not far from its headwaters and ran west of the river, providing water to fields north of the mission.

When the mission was moved to the east side of the river, a new acequia was needed to bring water to fields on that side of the river and to the new mission itself. This acequia, usually called the Acequia Madre de Valero or the Alamo Acequia, began just downstream from the entrance to the Upper Labor Acequia, in what is now Breckinridge Park, and flowed south, finally returning to the river near the modern South Alamo Street bridge. Numerous branches fanned out from the Acequia Madre de Valero, including one that ran to Mission San Antonio de Valero. Visitors to the Alamo can see a reconstructed segment of this acequia branch behind the church building.

The course of each acequia was dictated by the landscape. The water needed to remain near the ground surface so that it could be distributed to the fields without pumping. Therefore, each acequia began behind a diversion dam that raised the level of the water source enough to spill into the man-made channel. From that point the acequia followed the landscape, always roughly the same depth and width, with the natural slope of the land providing the gradual change in elevation required to keep the water moving. This method of construction, using only simple measuring and surveying tools, required a willingness to literally “go with the flow”, that is, the acequia meandered where it needed to go as dictated by the landscape. This resulted in acequia channels that sometimes had considerable meanders. Everything else, such as roads and property boundaries, had to accommodate the wandering of the acequias. Occasional “*desaguas*”, that is, ditches that returned excess water flow to the river, helped control water flow in the acequias.

The amount of water needed to irrigate a given parcel of land, measured in hours during which gates from the acequia could be opened per week, was referred to as *una dula* in early documents.

Water was distributed to the fields by opening gates to branches leading to individual fields for a number of hours per week and the water right was often listed as part of the deed in early land records.

The Spanish-built acequia system in San Antonio eventually contained more than 50 miles of ditches and major branches (Figure 10). The early acequias were still fully operational more than a hundred and fifty years later.

The acequias in the more urban areas of San Antonio had been used primarily to provide drinking water to the inhabitants, but were also used for washing (Figure 11), and unfortunately as sewers and for other unsanitary purposes. When they were made obsolete by modern piped water systems, they were abandoned and later filled. And, over time, knowledge of the original course of the acequias in some parts of town was lost. Some of the more rural acequias were still used in the traditional fashion well into the twentieth century.

"These wandering waterways made the missions possible, predetermined the city's seemingly random first thoroughfares, dictated its settlement and growth patterns and affected the lifestyle of the community well into the twentieth century."

I. Wayne Cox (2004)



Figure 11. A woman watches while a young girl washes clothing in the acequia. In 1942, this acequia near Mission Espada was still being used by some of the rural population in ways that had not changed since it was built, 200 years before. (San Antonio Light Collection, The UT Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio, L-2969-D. Gift of the Hearts Corporation).

The San Juan Acequia, is still in use as it was originally intended, as a way to irrigate farm fields near the San Juan Mission, and includes an aqueduct that has carried water over a creek near Mission Espada for almost 200 years.

Along the edge of the project area, the Acequia Madre de Valero makes a sharp meander to the east in order to skirt higher ground in the northern part of the property. Old survey maps indicate the course of the acequia in this area (Figure 12). By 1934, survey maps show that the portion of the Acequia Madre de Valero north of Cunningham had been filled in. Knowledge of the original course was lost. At some time, probably before the property was purchased by Mr. Johnson (see below) the southern section of the acequia within the project area was also filled (Figure 13).

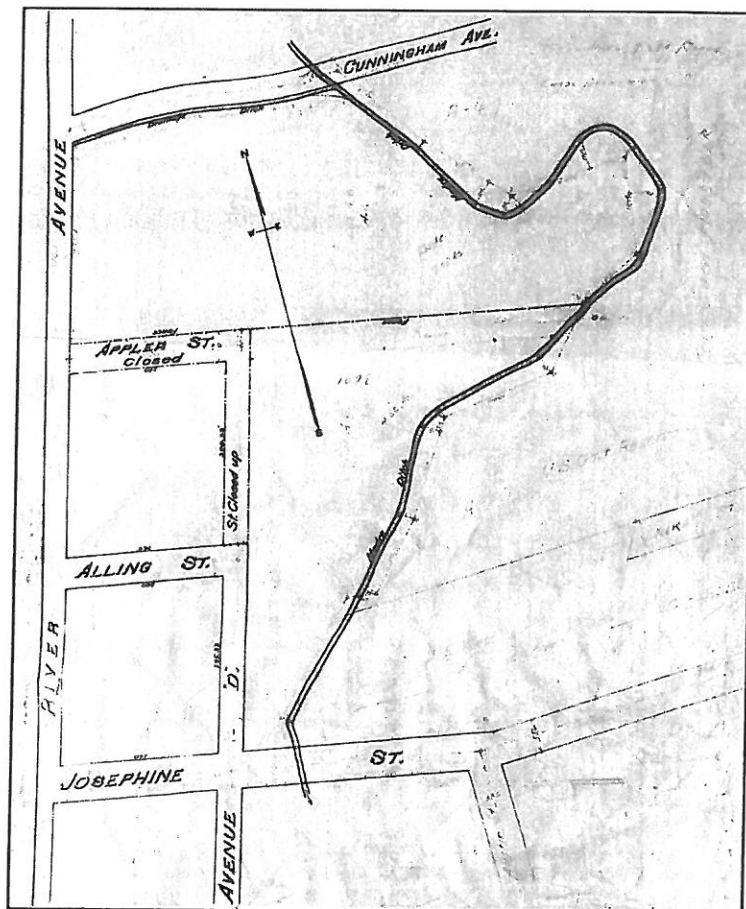


Figure 12. Surveyor's map of the project area in 1916, showing the route of the Acequia Madre. Note that the northern end of North Alamo Street (still called Avenue D in this map) does not yet extend to the intersection of Broadway (still called River Avenue) and Cunningham.

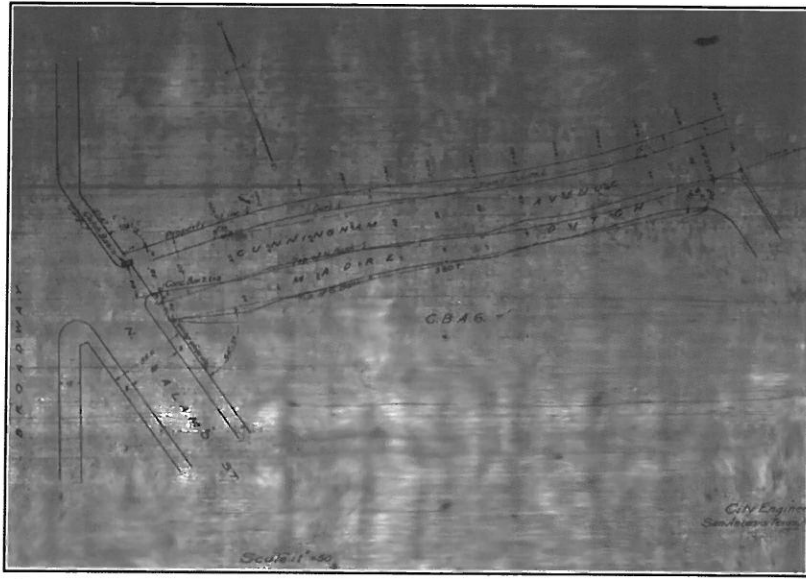


Figure 13. Surveyor's map of Cunningham Street in 1934. Note that the portion of the Acequia Madre de Valero that crossed Cunningham in the past has been filled, so that this surveyor mistook the old desagua that ran south of Cunningham as part of the acequia.

James E. Johnson and Playland Park

In 2007, Ed Gaida, who had worked at Playland Park during its last decade of operation and continued as caretaker for several decades afterwards, published a review of the history of the Park. The majority of this section is derived from this excellent book.

James E. Johnson, known throughout his life as Jimmy, was born in Arlington, Nebraska on November 13, 1901. Beginning at age 20, he was a traveling chewing gum salesman, until he joined the sales staff of Western Electric Piano Co. in Chicago. This company was lost during the Depression, but in 1934, Johnson started a new company selling pinball machines and later illegal table-top gambling machines. This business had ups and downs, being forced into bankruptcy at one point, but emerged from this strong enough to continue until 1942, when the factory was converted to building precision parts for bomb sights. The business continued to make money for the Johnson family and his partners until it was sold in 1980.

In 1942, Johnson, with a partner, got permission from the City of San Antonio to build an amusement park

in the part of Brackenridge Park now known as the Polo Grounds. Later that year, however, the City took note that the gift of the park property from George Brackenridge included a clause that

One of Jimmy Johnson's first jobs was to do chores such as stoking the furnace for the Orthodox Jewish families in his neighborhood, who did not perform household work on the Sabbath.

stipulated that no for-profit organizations could use the park. Forced to move, Johnson broke with his partner and leased the property at the corner of North Alamo and Broadway and began development of Playland Park. The same year, he moved his family to San Antonio.

Playland Park opened its gates for the first time on May 14, 1943. Johnson took advantage of the free advertisement inherent in such rides as the carousel, whose animals were stylized swans rather than horses, and the Ferris wheel. Both these rides were deliberately placed near the front of the park, where they were readily visible from nearby streets. The first season was a financial success and Playland Park was firmly established as part of the San Antonio landscape.

The attempt to run something as "frivolous" as an amusement park during the war years had its difficulties. Spare parts for the machinery were difficult or impossible to acquire. Even stuffed toys to use as prizes at the various games were not available. Soft plaster "kewpie" dolls were used until the end of the war.

As the war was coming to a close, Johnson was beginning to plan for a large wooden roller coaster that could not be built until war-time material restrictions were eased. Since the roller coaster would be a permanent fixture on the property, Johnson decided to exercise his option to buy the property in 1945. He also purchased the property to the south so he had room for more rides and a parking lot. Construction of the "Rocket" roller coaster began. It extended from near the parking lot onto the land within the meander of the old Acequia Madre de Valero on the eastern side of the property.

On August 15, 1947, the "Rocket" was opened for business. Designed by Herbert P. Schmeck, the "Rocket" was considered one of the best wooden roller coasters in the country. In the 33 years of its tenure at Playland Park it carried more than 3 million people.

Johnson understood the value of good relations with the surrounding community. Every year he held a special day for children from the city's orphanages. Children were given tickets announcing that they

Though he was ever the businessman, Johnson understood the importance of safety. Every winter, each of the rides was disassembled, inspected, and repaired. At least two employees walked the tracks of the "Rocket" every single day before the ride was opened. In the 37 years of its operation, no major accidents happened at Playland, even though some of the equipment was many decades old before it was purchased for use at Playland.

After Playland was closed in 1980, an amusement park in Pennsylvania bought the "Rocket", took it apart, shipped it in pieces, reassembled it and renamed it the "Phoenix". In spite of its age, the "Phoenix" is still considered one of the top ten wooden roller coasters in the U. S.

were guests of James E. Johnson, allowing free rides, a free comic book, and one free ice cream, soda, and popcorn each. Free passes were made available to airmen in basic training at Lackland Air Force Base.

One aspect of Johnson's social behavior can be seen in his attitude toward African Americans. In the 1940s and until 1954 it was against the law in Texas and in San Antonio to allow African Americans into public businesses that did not have separate accommodations for them. Since providing such a separate facility for African Americans would not be feasible in an amusement park setting, Johnson obeyed the law and black San Antonians were not allowed in the park. But one day a year he closed the park to white patrons and opened it for African Americans. It was always a special day, with many raffles that included such prizes as major appliances. Of course, he made a great deal of money on this day each year, but it can be inferred that it was not purely a business decision by the choice of the date on which it was always celebrated. It was June 19, a day celebrated as "Juneteenth" by African Americans in Texas as the day on which slavery came to an official end in the state. Once the law changed, black San Antonians were welcome at Playland.

Playland Park continued to operate as a successful business until the mid-70s, when changing times and Johnson's refusal to make significant changes in the park resulted in gradually increasing losses. Johnson was satisfied because his business in Chicago made so much money he needed a tax shelter. He could maintain the park the way he wanted it, as it always had been, and still profit from its lack of profits. When the business in Chicago was sold in 1980, there was no longer an impetus to maintain Playland. At midnight on Labor Day in 1980, the park was closed (Figure 14). Although there were several offers to buy the park, Johnson refused. Playland was his, and he did not want anyone else to have it.



Figure 14. *The main gate of Playland in 2008, from inside the fence. Notice the supports for the large neon sign that has been removed.*

After the closing of Playland, most of the rides were sold. The buildings were allowed to deteriorate. Playland now exists almost entirely in the memories of those who went there as children.

SUMMARY

The project area surveyed by CAR has a long history dating back the Spanish Colonial period and beginning with the construction of the acequia. By mid-1943, Playland Park stood in the area. The park remained in use for 38 years and closed in 1980. Remains of San Antonio amusement park are scattered across the project area surveyed by CAR, but are in poor condition. The entire project area appeared to have been either seriously disturbed by construction activities associated with the park or to have been covered with asphalt paving or fill. The removal of the concrete footings for the roller coaster by bulldozer has seriously impacted the landscape within the meander of the old acequia, on the eastern side of the property.

The entire southern end of the property, from the point where the acequia has been filled in, appears to be under layers of fill. Examination of the ditch on the eastern edge of the property indicates that it follows the old course of the Acequia Madre de Valero, but all traces of the

original acequia have been obliterated by erosion in the northern part of the project area. The condition of the acequia in the southern part of the project, which was filled at some time after about 1916, has not been determined.

While few traces of the glory days of the acequia and Park remain on the property, those that are still there serve as silent reminders of the long history of this spot of land. They remind us of the Colonial roots of the city and of happy rides on the Rocket that are forever etched in the memories of many Antonians.

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